

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Walt Disney World and Orlando

In This Chapter

- ▶ Experiencing the best that Orlando has to offer
- ▶ Finding the city's best hotels
- ▶ Getting a taste of the best dining in Orlando
- ▶ Boarding the coolest theme-park rides
- ▶ Discovering the greatest shows and attractions

Vacationing in Orlando is like escaping to another time and place, a world of fantasy, a world filled with fun. The city attracts the young and the young at heart from all over the world, all of whom come to experience the theme parks, the world-class resorts, and the area's spectacular natural beauty. It should come as no surprise to you that Orlando is the number-one family vacation destination in the United States, not to mention one of the top vacation destinations in the world. Yes, it gets crowded, and in the summer it's hot and sticky, but one thing you definitely won't ever be is bored. And in this chapter, I offer the best of the best that Orlando and Walt Disney World have to offer.

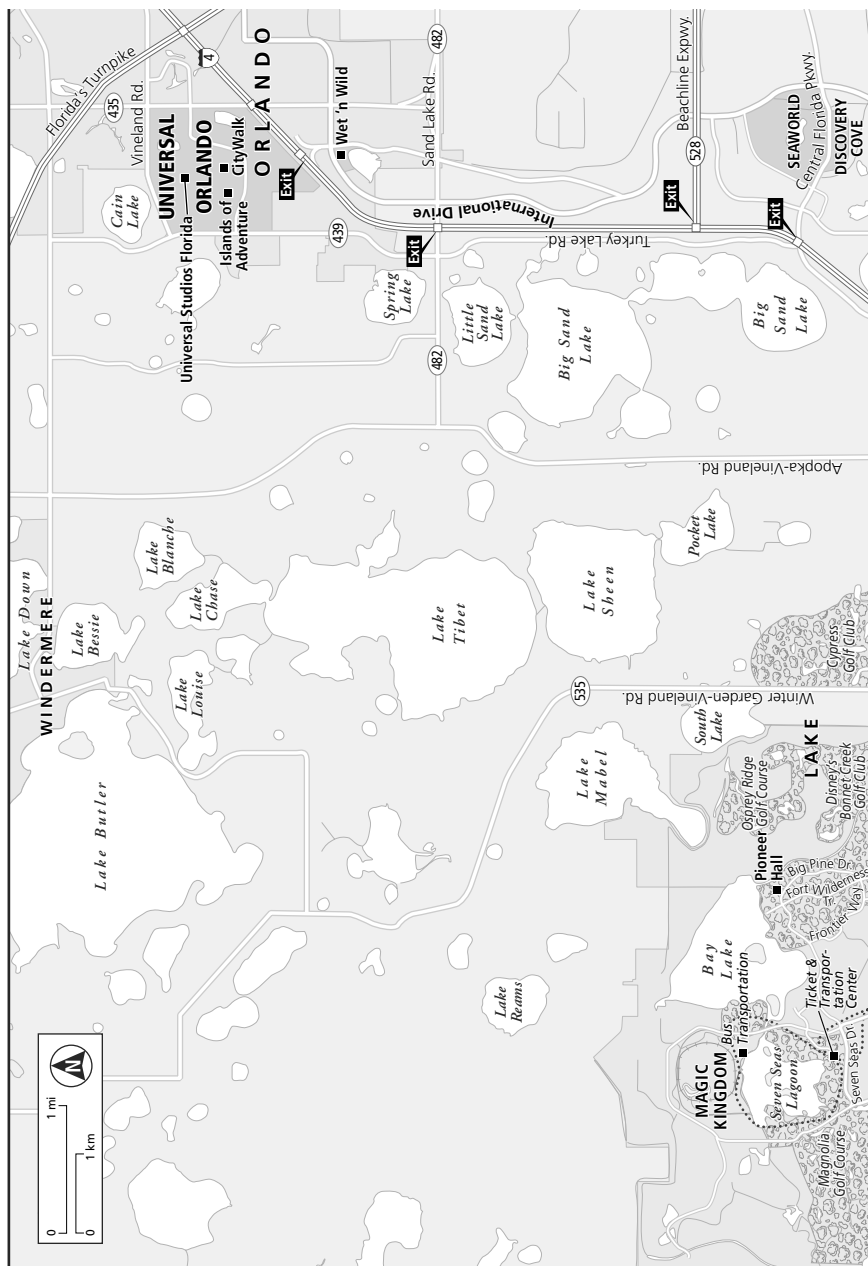


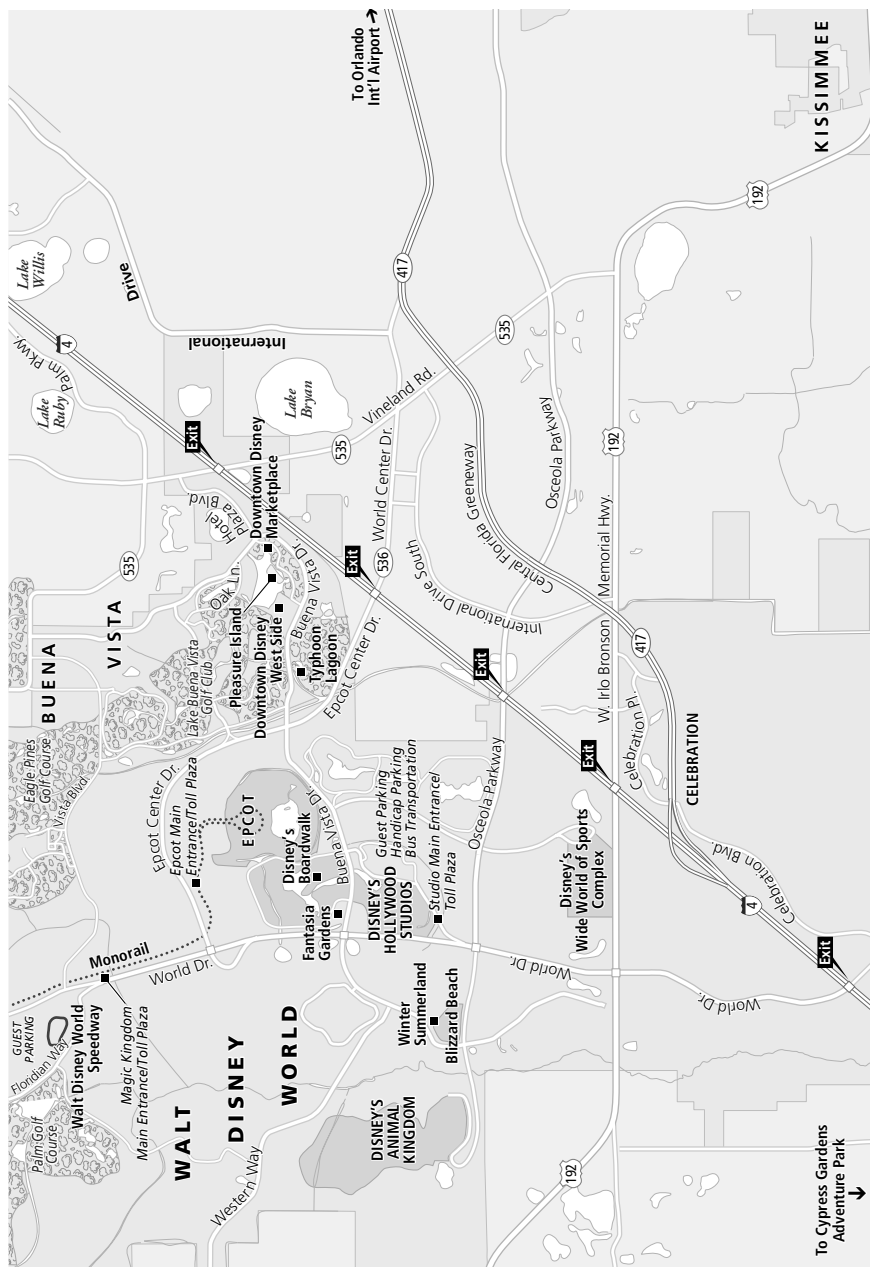
Note: With the exception of the items listed in “The Best Orlando Experiences,” I highlight all the hotels, restaurants, and attractions in this chapter with a Best of the Best icon when reviewed in this book.

The Best Orlando Experiences

If images of Cinderella Castle pop into your head at the mention of Orlando, you're not alone. The **Magic Kingdom's** iconic castle and the lovable mouse who started it all are, by far, the most famous of all Disney icons and the reason most folks venture to the Sunshine State in the first place. Keep in mind that, although a visit to the Magic Kingdom

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is one of the biggest highlights of the Orlando experience, especially for kids, plenty more attractions and experiences await:

- ✓ **Spend a day exploring Disney's Animal Kingdom.** Embark on an undersea adventure at **Finding Nemo—The Musical**, trek through the Himalayan Mountains in search of the legendary Yeti on **Expedition Everest – Legend of the Forbidden Mountain**, or make your way by foot through the rain forests and jungles of Asia for a glimpse of the exotic wildlife that inhabit the park. **Kali River Rapids** will leave you soaked, but that's half the fun. Head out on the **Kilimanjaro Safaris** for an expedition through the African savanna or travel back to the time when dinosaurs ruled the Earth. Be sure to catch **Mickey's Jammin' Jungle Parade**, one of the most distinctive and lively parades in all of Disney. (Check out Chapter 15 for details about the park.)
- ✓ **Spend a day traveling the world at Epcot.** At Epcot, you can find high-speed thrills aboard **Mission: SPACE** and **Test Track**, a breath-taking experience **Soarin'** over the California landscape, undersea adventure exploring **The Seas with Nemo & Friends**, and the simple pleasure of splashing about in the dancing waters. Then it's off to tour some of the world's most fascinating countries along the World Showcase. Dance with the **oompah band** in Germany or try to **belly-dance** with the natives in Morocco. (For more details about things to do at Epcot, see Chapter 13.)
- ✓ **Go behind the scenes at Disney's Hollywood Studios.** You can find some of the most intense thrills in all of Walt Disney World here, with both the **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror** and **Rock 'n' Roller Coaster Starring Aerosmith** taking center stage. But be sure to take in the spectacular shows, too — this is a studio after all. Top billing goes to **Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show**, the park's newest addition, and the **Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!** Close out the night with the incredible **Fantasmic!**, an after-dark show that combines a love for all things Disney with the most amazing combination of water and fireworks. (See Chapter 14 for the lowdown on all the park has to offer.)
- ✓ **Experience Universal Studios Florida (USF).** Once just a diversion, Universal has worked hard to turn itself into a true destination. The rides here run the gamut from all ages to “What was I thinking?” Not-to-be-missed attractions include **Revenge of the Mummy**, **Terminator 2: 3D Battle Across Time**, **Men in Black Alien Attack**, and recent additions: **Fear Factor Live** and **Shrek 4-D**. Top off the day by taking in the all-new nighttime spectacular **Universal 360 – A Cinesphere Spectacular**. The entire lagoon lights up with pyrotechnic effects, laser lights, and four 360-degree projection cinespheres. (Chapter 18 offers information on other cool things to see and do at USF.)

- ✔ **Test your physical limits at Islands of Adventure.** You can spin; you can fly upside down; you can get wet. And that's all just in the first few minutes in this park. Don't miss the **Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man**; **Dueling Dragons** twin roller coasters; **Jurassic Park River Adventure**; and the big, green behemoth, the **Incredible Hulk Coaster**. If it's really hot out, a good soak on **Popeye & Bluto's Bilge-Rat Barges** is just the thing to refresh you. (For information on other adventures awaiting you in the park, see Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Find your own waterworld at SeaWorld and Discovery Cove.** SeaWorld has a few thrill rides — namely, **Journey to Atlantis**, **Kraken**, and **Wild Arctic** — but the real reason to visit both parks is the chance to observe and interact with the wide variety of marine life that inhabits them. Discovery Cove even allows you the chance to swim with a dolphin. It's a bit pricey, but it's well worth it if you appreciate unique experiences. (For more information on both parks, see Chapter 20.)
- ✔ **Take in an evening park performance.** Many of the parks love to close out their day with a fireworks display or show-stopping performance that's guaranteed to impress. So check out the Magic Kingdom's **Wishes Nighttime Spectacular** or "**SpectroMagic**" **Parade**, Epcot's **IllumiNations: Reflections of Earth**, Disney's Hollywood Studios' **Fantasmic!**, Universal Studios' **Universal 360**, or SeaWorld's **Odyssea**, **Fusion**, or **Mistify**. For a truly magical performance, see **Cirque du Soleil's La Nouba**; it's expensive, but also unforgettable. (For information on all these spectacles, see Chapters 12–14, 18, 20, and 25.)
- ✔ **Go to Gatorland.** An Orlando original, Gatorland was astounding visitors with its crocodiles and alligators long before the Mouse moved in. Take in one of the amazing shows, such as **Gator Wrestlin'** and **Gator Jumperoo**, or just take a leisurely stroll through swamp and marsh on the boardwalks — no one's in a hurry here. (For more information on Gatorland, see Chapter 21.)

The Best Hotels

One of the cool things about a trip to Orlando is the chance to stay at one of its great resorts or themed hotels. Check out Chapter 9 for more in-depth information about all the accommodations listed in this section:

- ✔ **Best for Families:** Both **Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge** and **Disney's Wilderness Lodge** offer spectacular surroundings, kid-friendly eateries, and rooms with bunk beds. At nearby Lake Buena Vista, the **Nickelodeon Family Suites Resort** features themed KidSuites (separate sleeping areas with bunk beds, game stations, and TVs for the kids), water-park-like pools, and Nick-style entertainment. In Kissimmee, **Seralago Hotel & Suites Maingate East** features tons of on-site activities and kid suites, too.



- ✓ **Best Inexpensive Hotels:** If your budget determines where you stay, several good choices offer basic amenities in convenient locations for a low price. On Disney property, choose **Disney's Pop Century Resort**, which offers themed motel-style rooms for the lowest prices in Mickeyville. **Disney's All-Star Resorts** recently revamped several of their rooms making them into suites — and they're some of the least expensive in town. The **Masters Inn Maingate** offers a good location and moderate amenities for less than \$50 a night, as does **America's Best Value Inn & Suites**.
- ✓ **Best Moderate Hotels:** **Disney's Coronado Springs Resort** edges out the other two WDW moderate resorts with slightly larger rooms and a cool Mayan temple pool.
- ✓ **Best for a Romantic Getaway:** The **Portofino Bay Hotel** at Universal is *molto* romantic with its quaint Italian-village theme. If money is no object, sweep your significant other off to a getaway at the lushly tropical **Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes** or the Mediterranean-inspired **Villas of Grand Cypress**.
- ✓ **Best Hotel for Business Travelers:** The **Orlando World Center Marriott Resort** in Lake Buena Vista and the **Peabody Orlando** both offer an extensive array of business services and amenities.
- ✓ **Best Location:** All three Universal Orlando resorts are within walking distance of Universal's parks and CityWalk, and all offer boat transportation to the theme parks as well. But if I had to choose the best of the bunch for location and value, I like the **Royal Pacific Resort** best. At WDW, **Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa** offers the best accommodations in the World and is right on the monorail. For those who must be in the thick of it all, **Disney's Yacht Club Resort**, **Disney's Beach Club Resort**, and **Disney's BoardWalk** (all close to Epcot) also get my vote.
- ✓ **Best Pools:** The **Hard Rock Hotel** boasts a sandy beach and an underwater sound system that brings out the lounging rock star in you. Stormalong Bay is the 3-acre mini water park that calls itself a pool at **Disney's Yacht Club Resort** and **Disney's Beach Club Resort**. Away from the theme parks, the **Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress** has an amazing lagoon-like pool with rock grottoes and 12 waterfalls, while the **JW Marriott Orlando, Grande Lakes** boasts an incredible lazy river surrounded by lush landscaping. The **Nickelodeon Family Suites Resort** wins the kids' vote with its water-park-style pools sporting flumes, climbing nets, and slides.

The Best Restaurants

Fast food may rule in Orlando, but the city doesn't lack good places to dine. You can find more in-depth information about all these restaurants in Chapter 10:

- ✔ **Best for Kids:** It's hard to go wrong with any of the Walt Disney World **character breakfasts**. Among Disney's resorts the **Whispering Canyon Café** (Wilderness Lodge) ensures a stompin' good time with its kid-friendly activities and wild Western theme. Kids also love the noisy jungle-themed **Rainforest Café** (Downtown Disney and Animal Kingdom).
- ✔ **Best Seafood:** **Todd English's bluezoo** (inside the Dolphin) is a relative newcomer on the scene, but consistently draws raves for its food and décor. **Fulton's Crab House** (Pleasure Island) is a long-standing favorite with a great wine list and a creative menu.
- ✔ **Best Steakhouse:** The highly regarded **Yachtsman Steakhouse** (Disney's Yacht Club Resort) offers wood-fire grilled steaks.
- ✔ **Best Dining with a View:** This one's a toss-up between **Manuel's on the 28th**, which offers a stunning after-dark view of the city and food to match, and the **California Grill**, which boasts spectacular views of Disney's fireworks and a winning wine list.
- ✔ **Best Buffet:** **Boma-Flavors of Africa**, inside Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge, offers the most eclectic buffet menu in Orlando, mingling traditional buffet items with exotic African fare. The wine list features an array of African vintages.
- ✔ **Best Margarita:** Head to **Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville**, of course. The mango margarita's the best of the bunch.
- ✔ **Best Spot for a Romantic Meal:** **Victoria & Albert's**, in Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa, is the runaway leader.
- ✔ **Best Value:** **Kim Wu**, a local favorite for over 20 years, features fabulous food and friendly service. **Café Tu Tu Tango** offers inexpensive tapas dishes, ranging from Cajun egg rolls with blackened chicken to alligator bites that are perfect for sharing.



The Best Thrill Rides

If you're a speed freak who lives for the ups and downs of a good ride, here are the top stomach churners and G-force generators in Orlando:

- ✔ **Expedition Everest – Legend of the Forbidden Mountain** (Animal Kingdom): Disney's latest contribution to the thrills category takes you on a hair-raising expedition through the Himalayan Mountains ending in a face-to-face encounter with the legendary Yeti. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✔ **Mission: SPACE** (Epcot): Disney used NASA technology to create an astronaut simulator so effective that they've installed "lunch bags" for all the motion sickness it causes. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **Rock 'n' Roller Coaster Starring Aerosmith** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): You launch from 0 to 60 mph in 2.8 seconds and go right

into the first inversion as 120 speakers in your “stretch limo” main-line Aerosmith at (yeeeow!) 32,000 watts right into your ears. (See Chapter 14.)

- ✔ **Twilight Zone Tower of Terror** (Disney’s Hollywood Studios): The free-fall experiences (there are several possible scenarios) are more than thrilling — they’re scary. After your legs stop shaking, you *may* want to ride again. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Summit Plummet** (Disney’s Blizzard Beach): This one starts slow, with a lift ride to a 120-foot mountain summit. But it finishes with the world’s fastest body slide, a test of your courage and swimsuit as it virtually goes straight down and has you moving sans vehicle at 60 mph by the end. (See Chapter 16.)
- ✔ **Revenge of the Mummy the Ride** (Universal Studios Florida): This thrill ride combines a coaster run with magnetism and the best cinematic special-effects technology (flame ceilings, scarabs pouring out of the walls) for a ride that touches on your worst phobias. (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man** (Islands of Adventure): 3-D doesn’t get any better than this chase-the-bad-guys ride where you twist, spin, and soar before a simulated 400-foot drop that feels an awful lot like the real thing. It’s sure to get your Spidey senses tingling. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Dueling Dragons** (Islands of Adventure): Your legs dangle as you do five inversions at 55 to 60 mph and — get this! — three times come within 12 inches of the other roller coaster. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **The Incredible Hulk Coaster** (Islands of Adventure): You blast from 0 to 40 mph in two seconds, spin upside down more than 100 feet from the ground, and execute seven rollovers and two deep drops on this glow-in-the-dark roller coaster. You may find this hard to believe, but it’s the smoothest ride around. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Jurassic Park River Adventure** (Islands of Adventure): Riders travel through a prehistoric land inhabited by fierce, unbelievably real-looking dinosaurs. Creatures five stories tall growl and bare their teeth, some within inches of your face. As if that weren’t enough, after being threatened by a Tyrannosaurus rex, you plunge 85 feet almost straight down into water below. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Kraken** (SeaWorld): This floorless, open-sided coaster uses speed (up to 65 mph), steep climbs, deep drops, and seven loops to create a stomach-churning ride that lasts far too long for some folks. (See Chapter 20.)

The Best of the Rest

For those who can’t stomach the thought of boarding anything that pulls the same G-forces as a fighter jet or induces adrenaline rushes of any

sort of magnitude, the theme parks have several exceptional (and tamer) rides and shows that nobody should overlook:

- ✔ **The Haunted Mansion** (Magic Kingdom): Forget the unfortunate Eddie Murphy film and be sure to visit this cult favorite, which shows off Disney's knack for details as 999 ghosts offer up more delights than frights. (See Chapter 12.)
- ✔ **Pirates of the Caribbean** (Magic Kingdom): This oldie but goodie, made even more popular by the Oscar-nominated film of the same name, features randy, rum-filled pirates, and lots of yo-ho-ho music. Recent refurbishments spiced it up even further to include improved special effects and such famous faces as Captain Jack Sparrow, Barbossa, and Davy Jones. (See Chapter 12.)
- ✔ **Test Track** (Epcot): Fasten your seatbelts. This collaboration with GM allows riders to take a "car" through a series of standard motor vehicle test sequences that include a near crash, a speed run, and some rather interesting weather. It's not adrenaline pumping enough to be considered a thriller, but it's definitely a cool ride. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **The Seas with Nemo & Friends** (Epcot): Aboard slow-moving "Clamobiles" you'll join in the search for Nemo alongside a slew of familiar finned friends as they swim right along with the aquarium's live inhabitants. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **Soarin'** (Epcot): After boarding the multiseat gliders, you'll find yourself flying high over some of California's most spectacular landscapes with realistic multisensory effects. (See Chapter 13.)
- ✔ **Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): Special effects, razzle-dazzle stunts, and pyrotechnics make this stunt show worth the (incredibly long) wait. Wear a brightly colored shirt, wave your arms spastically, and you may be called up on stage as an extra. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Lights, Motors, Action! Extreme Stunt Show** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): A high-speed car chase, pyrotechnics, special effects, and some amazing stunt driving add up to a thrill-packed show for the whole family. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Mickey's PhilharMagic** (Magic Kingdom): A very mischievous Donald has once again gotten himself in a spot of trouble — and soon after the show begins you find yourself smack in the middle of it all. This very amusing and entertaining show combines a comedic cast of Disney characters, a delightful musical score, and an array of special effects that will tickle your senses as Mickey, Donald, Lumiere, and Ariel, to name a few, seemingly spring right off the screen thanks to some of the most spectacular 3-D effects (not to mention the world's largest wraparound screen) I've ever experienced. This one's not to be missed. (See Chapter 12.)

- ✔ **Muppet Vision 3-D** (Disney's Hollywood Studios): The action takes place in a re-creation of the Muppets' theater (complete with the blessedly crotchety Statler and Waldorf critiquing the action from the balcony) and is a zany mix of 3-D film, animatronics, live action, and special effects. (See Chapter 14.)
- ✔ **Finding Nemo—The Musical** (Animal Kingdom): Film favorites including Nemo, Marlin, Dory, Crush, and Bruce jump from the big screen into the “big blue,” live and on stage. Coming to life before your eyes, actors combine with creatively designed puppet-like costumes to re-create the original undersea adventure in this spectacular and entrancing production. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✔ **Festival of the Lion King** (Animal Kingdom): One of the best shows in town, this is a don't-miss Broadway-esque version of the famous Circle of Life. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✔ **Kilimanjaro Safaris** (Animal Kingdom): At this must-see attraction, the special safari trucks bump you about as you head out into Disney's version of the African wilderness. You'll enjoy the thrill of seeing giraffes and zebras up close. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✔ **Men in Black Alien Attack** (Universal Studios Florida): Zap icky aliens with ray guns as you ride through the streets of New York. At the conclusion, you tackle the Big Roach himself and then get rated by Will Smith for your shooting prowess. (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **Shrek 4-D** (Universal Studios Florida): This attraction uses 3-D movie effects married with seats that move and bounce to continue the story of Shrek and Fiona. It's fun for all ages and *very* popular! (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **Terminator 2: 3D Battle Across Time** (Universal Studios Florida): This production features the creepy-steely T-1,000,000 and live-action doubles of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Edward Furlong, who roar onto the stage on Harleys and then into a giant movie screen, a very cool trick you absolutely must see. This show is an absolute winner. (See Chapter 18.)
- ✔ **Popeye & Bluto's Bilge-Rat Barges** (Islands of Adventure): A bit too tame to be considered a thrill ride, this white-water raft experience can have you soaked in no time at all. If the waves don't get you, the kids firing water soakers at you from the sidelines won't miss. (See Chapter 19.)
- ✔ **Believe** (SeaWorld): This all new Shamu extravaganza will have you “oohing” and “ahhing” even more than before as the sleek, black-and-white killer whale shows off his skill and strength on a splashy souped-up set. (See Chapter 20.)
- ✔ **Shark Encounter** (SeaWorld): At this aquatic exhibit, you find a walk-through tunnel populated with the scarier denizens of the deep, such as moray eels, barracudas, rays, scorpion fish, and (of course) sharks. It's the coolest aquarium in town. (See Chapter 20.)